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James Earl Ray

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Around the Nation

WASHINGTON POST

King Slayer's Escape Foiled

PETROS, Tenn. — James Earl Ray, convicted killer of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., broke out of his cell Monday after months of preparation but found his escape tunnel full of 400-degree steam.

Guards caught the 43-year-old convict cowering in the shadow of a building in the yard of Brushy Mountain State Prison at 3:15 a.m. EDT. He had with him a crowbar and two chisels.

Warden Robert Moore said Ray was apparently out of his cell for 15 or 20 minutes. He surrendered meekly and was taken to what officials called a more secure cell to resume serving his 99-year sentence for the 1968 murder.

Ray pleaded guilty to the killing but has been fighting for a new trial, claiming he was duped into a false confession.

Moore said Ray apparently spent several months using a nail to scratch away the cement around a concrete block in his cell wall. He removed the block and crawled into an air chamber leading to the prison yard.

He ripped bars from a ventilation fan in the air chamber and stepped into the prison yard. He then removed a manhole cover from a steam tunnel that went under the wall of the prison to an unguarded steam plant on the outside.

Ray crawled into the tunnel, but the warden said he "apparently found it too hot in there for comfort. He then crawled out of the tunnel into the prison yard, which is surrounded by wire-topped concrete walls.

Guards, meanwhile, noticed the broken bars on the fan and the open manhole and started a prisoner count. They found a dummy in Ray's bunk.

"He used hair apparently from clippings from the barber shop and stuffed clothes under the blankets," the Sharon Belcher was in an intensive care unit.

She suffered a head injury and rib fractures in the accident Sunday in Covington, a small community 35 miles south of Altanta.

"They never knew what hit them," said Newton County Coroner Sam Cowan. "I was in the first ambulance to arrive and, on first glance, I didn't see how there could be any survivors."

Newton County Sheriff Henry Odum said the 1962 car was "broadsided" by the first of four diesel engines pulling a 65-car Georgia Railroad freight train, then dragged for more than three-quarters of a mile.

Police said the car was operated by Danny Henderson, 16, who had obtained it less than three weeks before.

"It was his first car," one trooper commented. "Apparently he wanted to share it with his friends."

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